

A decorative border with intricate floral and scrollwork patterns, rendered in a dark brown color, framing the entire page.

GUZ 57

Philemon

Bible Commentary:
David Guzik TEV - LVII

David Guzik

David Guziks' Commentary On
57 Philemon
Biblical Text – TEV (Good News Bible)

Greeting

Phm 1:1 Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy the brother, to Philemon the beloved and our fellow-worker,

Phm 1:2 and to Apphia the beloved, and to Archippus our fellow-soldier, and to the church in your house:

Phm 1:3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Philemon's Love and Faith

Phm 1:4 I thank my God always making mention of you in my prayers,

Phm 1:5 hearing of your love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus, and toward all the saints,

Phm 1:6 so that the fellowship of your faith may operate in a full knowledge of every good thing in you for Jesus Christ.

Phm 1:7 For we have much joy and encouragement over your love, in that the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother.

Paul's Plea for Onesimus

Phm 1:8 Because of this, having much boldness in Christ to enjoin you to do what is becoming,

Phm 1:9 rather because of love I entreat, being such a one as Paul the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ;

Phm 1:10 I entreat you concerning my child Onesimus, whom I fathered in my bonds,

Phm 1:11 the one once worthless to you, but now useful to you and to me; whom I sent back to you.

Phm 1:12 Even receive him, that is, my heart;

Phm 1:13 Whom I resolved to hold with myself, that for you he minister to me in the bonds of the gospel.

Phm 1:14 But I was willing to do nothing without your consent, that your good might not be by way of necessity, but by way of willingness.

Phm 1:15 For perhaps for this he was separated for an hour, that you might receive him eternally;

Phm 1:16 no longer as a slave, but beyond a slave, a beloved brother, especially to me, and how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

Phm 1:17 Then if you have me as a partner, receive him as me.

Phm 1:18 And if he wronged you in anything, or owes, reckon this to me.

Phm 1:19 I, Paul, wrote with my hand; I will repay (that I not say to you that you even owe yourself to me also).

Phm 1:20 Yes, brother, that I may have your help in the Lord, refresh my heart in the Lord.

Phm 1:21 Trusting to your obedience, I wrote to you, knowing that you will do even beyond what I say.

Phm 1:22 But at once prepare lodging for me; for I hope that through your prayers I shall be given to you.

Final Greetings

Phm 1:23 Epaphras, my fellow-captive in Christ Jesus, greets you,

Phm 1:24 also my fellow-workers Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke.

Phm 1:25 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.

Philemon 1:1-25

Philemon - Paul's Plea to a Friend, on Behalf of a Slave

"This is a notable Epistle, and full of worth; each word having its weight, each syllable its substance. From an abject subject, the receiving of a runaway servant, St. Paul soars like a heavenly eagle, and flies a high pitch of heavenly discourse." (John Trapp)

A. Greeting and introduction.

1. (1) *The writer and the recipient.*

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our beloved *friend* and fellow laborer,

a. **Paul, a prisoner:** This brief letter was written by Paul during his Roman imprisonment described in Act 28:30-31. There are some that believe he wrote it from time of imprisonment in Ephesus, but this is an unlikely possibility.

b. **A prisoner of Christ Jesus:** As always, Paul did not consider himself a prisoner of Rome, of circumstances, or of the religious leaders who started his legal troubles (Acts 23-24). Paul was **a prisoner of Jesus Christ**.

i. "They were not shackles which self had riveted, but a chain with which Christ had invested him; thus they were a badge of office." (Lightfoot, cited by Oesterley)

c. **To Philemon our beloved friend:** Paul wrote to **Philemon**, a Christian brother living in Colosse. This is the only place in the New Testament where **Philemon** is mentioned by name, but we do know that he was a **beloved friend** to Paul.

i. Paul's friendship with Philemon is shown by something significantly *missing* in his greeting. Of the 13 letters Paul wrote to churches or individuals, in 9

of them he called himself an *apostle* in the opening verse. In this letter (along with Philippians , 1 and 2 Thessalonians), Paul appealed to his reader more as a friend and less an apostle.

2. (2-3) *Greetings to the household of Philemon.*

To the beloved Apphia, Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

a. **To the beloved Apphia:** **Apphia** was probably the wife of Philemon, and **Archippus** was probably his son. This address to family members is unique among the letters of Paul, but it makes sense considering the content of the letter to Philemon. In this letter Paul will appeal to Philemon regarding a runaway slave who has met Jesus and found refuge with Paul. In the customs of that day, Philemon's wife **Apphia** was the supervisor of the slaves in the household, so the letter concerned her also.

i. Regarding the escaped slave, "She is as much a party to the decision as her husband, because according to the custom of the time, she had day-to-day responsibility for the slaves." (Rupprecht)

b. **To the church in your house:** This means that the church – or a portion of the church – in Colosse met in the **house** of Philemon. The earliest Christians had no property of their own for church buildings. The Jews had their synagogues, but Christians met in the homes of their members. The Christians of a city would be gathered into different "house churches" with a city "bishop" overseeing the different house churches. House churches are also mentioned in Rom 16:5 and Col 4:15.

i. "Up to the third century we have no certain evidence of the existence of church buildings for the

purpose of worship; all references point to private houses for this. In Rome several of the oldest churches appear to have been built on the sites of houses used for Christian worship.” (Oesterley)

ii. Spurgeon points out that apparently, Philemon had a church that met in his house. This suggests to believers that *their* homes should also be a church, and that each home can have the characteristics of a healthy church:

- Consisting of converted, saved people.
- Worshipping together.
- Together having a bond of unity.
- Supplied with oversight.
- Teaching always present.
- With a heart to minister to those on the outside.

c. **Grace to you and peace:** Paul gave his customary greeting of **grace** and **peace**, found in each one of his letters. However, this greeting was not directed towards an entire congregation, but to Philemon as an individual. This makes the letter unique among Paul’s writings.

i. The other Pastoral Epistles (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus) are also written first to individuals, but the character of their content suggests that they were intended to be shared with the entire congregation. Philemon really is a personal note written by Paul to one man.

ii. “It is only one sample of numberless letters which must have been written to his many friends and disciples by one of St Paul’s eager temperament and warm affections, in the course of a long and chequered life.” (Lightfoot)

3. (4-7) *Paul's thanks God for Philemon.*

I thank my God, making mention of you always in my prayers, hearing of your love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints, that the sharing of your faith may become effective by the acknowledgment of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus. For we have great joy and consolation in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother.

a. **I thank my God, making mention of you always in my prayers:** Paul prayed often for Philemon, and he prayed with thanksgiving to God. Philemon had been such a blessing to Paul that he prayed often and gratefully for him.

i. In Paul's letters, four times he says he *makes mention* for people: To the Romans (Rom 1:9), to the Ephesians (Eph 1:16), to the Thessalonians (1Th 1:2), and here at Phm 1:4.

ii. **Making mention** means that Paul did not always pray long, intricate prayers for Philemon, but he did often make **mention** of Philemon in his prayers.

b. **Hearing of your love and faith:** Paul thanked God for Philemon because of his **love and faith** – first towards Jesus and then towards **all the saints**. The word "**saints**" in the New Testament describes every true Christian, not just *a few exceptional* Christians.

c. **That the sharing of your faith:** Paul prayed for Philemon, desiring **that the sharing of his faith** would **become effective** as Philemon understood the work God did in him (**every good thing which is in you**).

i. This is the foundation for all effective evangelism: the overflow of a life touched and changed by God. God had done **every good thing** in the life of

Philemon. Now, it was a matter of it being *acknowledged* by both Philemon and those he shared the faith with. When these good things were understood, others would come to Jesus. The reason why some **sharing of the faith** is not **effective** is because we don't *know* or can't *communicate every good thing* God has done for us.

ii. **The sharing of your faith:** It is possible that Paul means the **sharing** of material things, prompted by **faith**. The ancient Greek word for **sharing** is *koinonia*, and sometimes Paul used *koinonia*, which means "fellowship, sharing," to describe giving (2Co 8:4; 2Co 9:13; Rom 15:6).

iii. "The apostle speaks here of the works of charity in which Philemon abounded toward poor Christians." (Clarke)

d. **Because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother:** Paul remembered how wonderfully Philemon had met the needs of other Christians. He effectively **refreshed** the **hearts** of others.

B. Paul's plea on behalf of Onesimus.

1. (8-11) *Paul speaks to Philemon regarding Onesimus*

Therefore, though I might be very bold in Christ to command you what is fitting, yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you—being such a one as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ—I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten while in my chains, who once was unprofitable to you, but now is profitable to you and to me.

a. **Therefore, though I might be very bold in Christ to command you what is fitting, yet for love's sake**

I rather appeal: It is clear that Paul will ask a favor of Philemon. Before he asked, he appealed **for love's sake** instead of making a **command**. Of course, under the surface Paul made it clear that he had the *right* to **command you what is fitting** – yet he appealed in **love**.

i. A loving appeal is often better than an authoritative command. Paul wasn't hesitant to command when the situation demanded it (1Co 5:4-5), but in wisdom he knew when to use the loving appeal.

b. Being such a one as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ: It was clear Paul would ask a favor of Philemon. Before he asked, he appealed to Philemon's sympathies by the way he described himself (**Paul, the aged**) and his circumstances (**a prisoner**).

i. Since Paul will make his appeal based on love, he does what he can to stir up the loving sympathy of Philemon. "Philemon, before I tell you what I need from you, remember that I'm an old man, and a prisoner at that."

ii. Some translations have *ambassador* instead of **aged**. There is a difference of one letter between the two ancient Greek words.

c. I appeal to you for my son Onesimus: Onesimus was an escaped slave who escaped from his master Philemon. It seems that when **Onesimus** escaped, he fled to Rome and – intentionally or not – met with Paul. Paul, though under house arrest by the Romans, led **Onesimus** to faith in Jesus Christ (**whom I have begotten while in my chains**).

i. It was logical that **Onesimus** escaped to Rome, the biggest city of the Roman Empire. Lightfoot says, "Rome was the natural cesspool for these offscourings

of humanity.” But at his providential meeting of Paul in Rome, **Onesimus** met the man who had led his master Philemon to Jesus (Phm 1:19).

ii. When Paul made this appeal on behalf of **Onesimus**, he followed deep traditions in Roman culture. There was an ancient Greek law (inherited by the Romans) allowing any escaped slave sanctuary at an altar. The altar could even be the hearth of a private family home; then the head of the family was obligated to give the slave protection while he tried to persuade him to return to his master. If the slave refused, the head of the family would put the slave up for auction and give the price for the slave to the former master. Paul gave **Onesimus** protection, and now was working the issue out with Philemon.

d. **My son Onesimus**: Paul often spoke of his converts as his “children.” Timothy (1Co 4:17), Titus (Tit 1:4), the Corinthian Christians (1Co 4:14) and the Galatian Christians (Gal 4:19) were each called Paul’s “children.”

e. **Who once was unprofitable to you, but now is profitable to you and to me**: In some way, Onesimus became **profitable** to Paul. Perhaps he served as an assistant to Paul during his house arrest. So, Philemon’s runaway slave Onesimus was now **unprofitable** to Philemon since he had escaped. But he had become **profitable** to Paul – and by extension, also to Philemon (**profitable to you and me**). Since Philemon loved Paul, if Onesimus helped Paul he was helping Philemon also.

i. When Paul spoke of Onesimus being **unprofitable** and **profitable**, he made a play on a word. The name **Onesimus** means *profitable*. Now that he was a Christian, Onesimus could live up to his name

ii. "It is significant to note that Paul claims that in Christ the useless person has been made useful." (Barclay)

iii. By making this clear to Philemon, Paul gently hinted that he would like to retain the services of this escaped slave – though he would not *command* Philemon to do this.

2. (12-14) *Paul sends Onesimus back with the hope that Philemon will allow him to return again to Paul.*

I am sending him back. You therefore receive him, that is, my own heart, whom I wished to keep with me, that on your behalf he might minister to me in my chains for the gospel. But without your consent I wanted to do nothing, that your good deed might not be by compulsion, as it were, but voluntary.

a. **I am sending him back. You therefore receive him, that is, my own heart:** Onesimus had done something wrong in that he escaped from his master. It was time to set that right, so Paul was willing to send **him back**. Yet Paul obviously wanted Philemon to deal gently with Onesimus. Under Roman law the slave owner had complete and total control over his slave. It wasn't unusual for slaves to be crucified for lesser offenses than escaping.

i. One ancient writer described how a slave carried a tray of crystal goblets, and he dropped and broke one. The master instantly demanded the slave be thrown into a fishpond full of lampreys that tore the slave to pieces. "Roman law... practically imposed no limits to the power of the master over his slave. The alternative of life or death rested solely with Philemon, and slaves were constantly crucified for far lighter offenses than this." (Lightfoot)

ii. Considering the huge number of slaves in the Roman Empire, they thought the harsh punishment against escaped or rebellious slaves was necessary. In an Empire with as many as 60 million slaves, there were constant fears of a slave revolt. Therefore, laws against runaways were strict. When captured, a runaway slave might be crucified, or branded with a red-hot iron on the forehead with the letter "F" for *fugitive*.

iii. Considering this, we understand Paul's phrase **that is, my own heart**. "Philemon, I know this man has done you wrong and deserves to be punished. But consider him as **my own heart** and be merciful to him."

b. **Whom I wished to keep with me, that on your behalf he might minister to me in my chains for the gospel**: Clearly, Paul wanted Onesimus to stay, because he had become a big help. Paul sweetened his appeal in three ways.

i. First, if Onesimus stayed he could serve Paul **on your behalf**. "Philemon, if you leave Onesimus with me, it's like *you* serving me, because Onesimus is your rightful servant."

ii. Secondly, if Onesimus stayed he helped a man in **chains**. "Philemon, I know Onesimus might be of some use to you. Yet I am in **chains** and need all the help I can get."

iii. Thirdly, if Onesimus stayed he helped man in **chains for the gospel**. "Philemon, please don't forget why I am here in **chains**. Remember that it is for the sake of the **gospel**."

c. **But without your consent I wanted to do nothing**: Paul made his appeal and made it strong and

skillfully. At the same time, he really did leave the decision to Philemon. He would appeal in love, but he would not trample over the rights of Philemon.

d. **That your good deed might not be by compulsion, as it were, but voluntary:** This explained why Paul would not force a decision on Philemon. If Paul *demand*ed it, then Philemon's **good deed** would come by **compulsion**, and not be **voluntary**. This would make the whole affair unpleasant and rob Philemon of any reward he otherwise might have had.

i. Essentially, Paul gave Philemon the freedom to do what was right in love before the Lord, and he gave the freedom to do it on his own choice and not out of Paul's compulsion.

3. (15-16) *Paul explains the providential hand of God at work in Onesimus' escape.*

For perhaps he departed for a while for this purpose, that you might receive him forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave—a beloved brother, especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

a. **Departed for a while:** It was true that Onesimus **departed**, but Paul would send him back. Somehow **departed for a while** doesn't sound nearly as bad as *escaped slave*.

i. In writing **departed for a while**, Paul spoke softly of a slave's escape. Clarke said of this phrase, "This is another most delicate stroke."

b. **For perhaps he departed for a while for this purpose:** In some ways the escape of Onesimus was nothing but trouble. It deprived Philemon of a worker and an asset. It made Onesimus a criminal, possibly subject to the death penalty. Yet in it all, Paul could see

a **purpose** of God and he wanted Philemon to see the **purpose** also.

i. The phrase, "**for perhaps**" is important. It showed that Paul did not come to Philemon in this manner: "Philemon, God has shown me His hidden hand at work, and you must accept what I see also." Instead, **for perhaps** means Paul's heart is like this: "Philemon, it seems to me that God is working in unusual ways here. Let me tell you what I see, and **perhaps** it will make sense to you."

c. **That you may receive him forever:** This was one aspect of the **purpose** Paul saw God working in the escape of Onesimus. Philemon the master lost a slave; but Philemon the Christian gained a brother, and he gained that brother **forever**.

i. "Here the apostle makes the best of an ill-matter. Converts are to be gently handled, and their former evil practices not to be aggravated." (Trapp)

d. **That you might receive him forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave; a beloved brother:** Paul "re-introduced" Onesimus to Philemon; not as a slave, but as a brother. In this relationship as brothers and not slaves, Paul effectively abolished the sting of the "master-slave" relationship and laid the foundation for the eventual legal abolition of slavery. If a man is a stranger, I might make him my slave. But how can my brother be my slave?

i. This breaking of the distinction between master and slave was an absolutely revolutionary development. It did far more to change society than the passing of a law prohibiting slavery.

ii. "What the letter to Philemon does is to bring the institution into an atmosphere where it could only wilt

and die. Where master and slave were united in affection as brothers in Christ, formal emancipation would be but a matter of expediency, the legal confirmation of their new relationship." (Bruce)

iii. The transformation of the *individual* is the key to the transformation of society and the moral environment. "But mark this word, - the true reforming of the drunkard lies in giving him a new heart; the true reclaiming of the harlot is to be found in a renewed nature.... I see certain of my brethren fiddling away at the branches of the tree of vice with their wooden saws, but, as for the gospel, it lays the axe at the roots of the whole forest of evil, and if it be fairly received into the heart it fells all the bad trees at once, and instead of them there spring up the fir tree, the pine tree, and the box tree together, to beautify the house of our Master's glory." (Spurgeon)

4. (17-19) *Paul's personal promise of restitution towards Philemon.*

If then you count me as a partner, receive him as *you would* me. But if he has wronged you or owes anything, put that on my account. I, Paul, am writing with my own hand. I will repay—not to mention to you that you owe me even your own self besides.

a. **If then you count me as a partner, receive him as *you would* me:** Again, Paul stood beside Onesimus, requesting mercy. "If I am your partner in the gospel, then treat Onesimus like you would treat me."

i. Paul's appeal is powerful because he stood beside a guilty man and said to the owner of the slave, "I know this man is a criminal and deserves punishment. Yet this slave is my friend, so if you punish him punish me also. I stand beside him to take his

punishment.” This is what Jesus does for us before our master, God the Father.

b. But if he has wronged you or owes anything, put that on my account: Apparently when Onesimus escaped he also stole from Philemon. This in itself was a capital crime. Paul asked that the value of what had been stolen be “charged” to Paul’s **account**. “Put it on my tab, Philemon.”

c. I, Paul, am writing with my own hand. I will repay: Paul was so serious about that he gave Philemon a personal IOU, written by his own hand. When Paul said to Philemon, “charge the wrong of Onesimus to my account,” he essentially did for Onesimus what Jesus did for us in taking our sins to *His* account.

i. “Here we see how Paul lays himself out for poor Onesimus, and with all his means pleads his cause with his master, and so sets himself as if he were Onesimus, and had himself done wrong to Philemon. Even as Christ did for us with God the Father, thus also does Paul for Onesimus with Philemon. We are all his Onesimi, to my thinking.” (Luther)

d. Not to mention to you that you owe me even your own self besides: While “accounts” were being studied, Paul mentioned one more thing. “Philemon, remember that I have a lot of credit on your account, because you **owe me even your own self besides.**” Paul could afford to pay Onesimus’ expenses because there was a sense in which Philemon owed Paul his salvation!

5. (20-22) Paul’s confidence in Philemon’s response.

Yes, brother, let me have joy from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in the Lord. Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will

do even more than I say. But, meanwhile, also prepare a guest room for me, for I trust that through your prayers I shall be granted to you.

a. **Let me have joy from you in the Lord:** Joy is more literally *profit*. It translates the ancient Greek word *oninemi*, the root word for the name "Onesimus." Paul used another play on words and the name Onesimus to communicate a not so subtle request: "Let me have Onesimus back from you in the Lord."

b. **Refresh my heart in the Lord:** Earlier in the letter, Paul said that Philemon was a man who refreshed the heart of the saints (Phm 1:7). Now, he specifically told Philemon how he could refresh Paul's heart: by allowing Onesimus to stay with Paul.

c. **Knowing that you will do even more than I say:** Paul's letter, full of appeal, was also full of hope. Philemon was not a bad or a harsh man. Paul had every reason to expect that he would fulfill his Christian duty and **do even more than** Paul asked.

d. **But, meanwhile, also prepare a guest room for me:** This showed the close relationship between Paul and Philemon. Paul knew that hospitality always waited for him at Philemon's home.

e. **I trust that through your prayers I shall be granted to you:** Paul wanted Philemon to pray, and he didn't think the prayers were a mere formality. Paul believed that it would be **through** the **prayers** of Philemon that they would once again be together.

C. Conclusion.

1. (23-24) *Paul sends greetings to Philemon from common friends in Rome.*

Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you, as do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow

laborers.

a. **Ephaphras... Mark... Aristachus... my fellow laborers:** Each of these names is also mentioned in the conclusion of the letter to the Colossians (Col 4:10-17). This confirms that the two letters went to the same place. Philemon lived in Colosse.

i. **Fellow prisoner:** "Literally 'a prisoner of war,' used metaphorically." (Oesterley)

b. **Demas:** "*Demas* is supposed to be the same who continued in his attachment to Paul till his last imprisonment at Rome: after which he left him for what is supposed to have been the *love of the world*, 2Ti 4:10." (Clarke)

2. (25) Conclusion to the letter.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ *be* with your spirit. Amen.

a. **The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ *be* with your spirit:** We see some enduring principles from Paul's letter to Philemon.

i. *Paul never called for an overthrow of the system of slavery, yet the principles in the letter to Philemon destroy slavery.* The greatest social changes come when people are changed, one heart at a time. In our society, racism and our low regard for the unborn cannot be eliminated by laws; a change of heart must occur.

ii. *Onesimus was obligated to return to his master.* When we do something wrong, we must do our best to set it right. Being made a *new creation* in Christ (2Co 5:17) does not end our responsibility to make restitution; it increases our obligation, even when restitution is difficult.

iii. *Onesimus was morally responsible for his wrongs.* The letter to Philemon demonstrates that we are *not* primarily directed by economics, despite the ideas of Marxists and modern liberals. Whether rich or poor, we are to be directed by the Spirit of God, not our economic status.

iv. "No part of the New Testament more clearly demonstrates integrated Christian thinking and living. It offers a blend, utterly characteristic of Paul, of love, wisdom, humour, gentleness, tact, and above all Christian and human maturity." (Wright)

b. **Amen:** The conclusion of the letter can lead us to ask, "Why is the letter to Philemon in our Bibles?" In A.D. 110, the bishop of Ephesus was named Onesimus, and it could have been this same man. If Onesimus was in his late teens or early twenties when Paul wrote this letter, he would then be about 70 years old in A.D.110 and that was not an unreasonable age for a bishop in those days.

i. "Ignatius, in his Epistle to the Ephesians, maketh mention of Onesimus, as pastor of Ephesus, next after Timothy. The Roman Martyrologue saith, that he was stoned to death at Rome, under Trajan the emperor." (Trapp)

ii. There is also some historical evidence that the letters of Paul were first gathered as a group in the city of Ephesus. Perhaps Onesimus first compiled the letters and wanted to make sure *his* letter – his charter of freedom – was included.